

La Opinion Article

Chiang Will Speak of the Importance of Unity

By Eileen Truax

Although he is in a key position for the development of the state, many people did not know the name of the Controller of California until several days ago, when it was revealed that he would be one of the speakers at the Democratic National Convention in Denver. It was then that the world turned to see John Chiang.

At 46 years old, this son of Taiwanese parents, born in New York and raised in Chicago oversees one of the activities that offer more challenges in the state: in the middle of a financial and budget crisis in California, Chiang is in charged with reviewing legislation and financial operation of the State.

In recent weeks, Chiang has been immersed in a controversy due to his opposition to the executive order given by Arnold Schwarzenegger on July 31 to reduce the pay of 200,000 workers to minimum wage. Chiang refused to implement the order and was sued by the Governor. The case is in litigation.

“People have different points of view, and I like complete discussions, that is part of democracy and what makes the United States unique. Everyone can express his opinion, but in this case (the Governor’s order) it is out of the norm.

According to Chiang, his opposition to the Governor’s project is due to the fact that it affects innocent people and in the long run it could cost the state more than the savings it currently represents.

“I understand his frustration over the budget, but the fact that you can’t reach an agreement with the Legislature does not mean that you put other people in harm’s way. You have hundreds of thousands of people trying to do things correctly, working for California: doctors, teachers, health care workers, engineers, friends, neighbors. I do not think we should generate a situation that involves innocent people over a political dispute,” he commented.

“And when you see the legal considerations, if we pay the wrong wages, according to federal law we would be the object of enormous penalties that could be double what would originally have been saved,” the Controller added. “We have to create a society of justice, respect and dignity and to say we don’t value your work, we don’t value your life, I believe is the worst commentary for people who are invaluable.”

Chiang also talked about other topics such as his immigrant family who didn’t have many financial resources and suffered discrimination for being the first Asian Americans in the neighborhood in South Chicago and the importance of cultural diversity as a pillar of American values.

Chiang is like many Californians. In the mornings he likes to swim. He enjoys playing basketball and in his free time he goes out to dinner with his wife, watches movies or reads. But recently he has not had much free time. In addition to his obligations in Sacramento and the many responsibilities of his position, Chiang is an active member of the Democratic Party.

“I affiliated myself for a variety of reasons, but initially it’s because I believe the Democratic Party is more sensitive to issues that have to do with diversity and opportunity,” he said as he remembered the history of his family. “Martin Luther King and Cesar Chavez were my childhood heroes: I didn’t understand the history completely but it has an effect on a child that’s 8, 10 years old and you see people fighting so the country can change its perception about people.”

“I’m not saying that is not the case for the Republicans,” he added, “but it doesn’t seem their party leadership has that position. The Democratic Party is far from perfect; it has many faults, but at least the leadership speaks genuinely of achieving the American dream for a wider spectrum of people.”

Chiang who is the only State official of Asian American descent in the United States recognizes that this was a factor to be invited to speak during the convention of his party. “The fact that I am the only one in this position is a sign of what we currently have in the United States. Asian Americans have had challenges in the last few decades, but we are improving. The great thing about the United States currently is that it has more electoral diversity.”

And there is also a generational factor. “I look younger than I am,” he says laughing. “I am older than I look, but I am younger than Barack. This is part of the generational leadership that believes in the United States and its great promise and in speaking to people.”

That is what Chiang will do tomorrow Tuesday. “I will speak about the promises, the hope and how we should unite our selves as one,” though he dismisses that this opportunity could signify a possible position with Obama if wins the presidency.

“I love what I do. I would feel profoundly honored if he offered me a position, but California is my home. My experience is in the subject matter of financial legislation and the responsibility of being Controller makes me feel excited every morning.” He says he plans to seek reelection to continue fighting for Californians so they can be taken into account and ensure the state acts responsibly.

“Our fiscal house is not in order. Everyone says that there isn’t enough money but we are leaving the next generations with an enormous debt. They will have to pay for what we did wrong, and I want to stop that practice,” he said. “I want a person to see us not as government but as someone who is concerned for them. I am an elected official, but in reality I am just like you.”